



[G W F Hegel, 1770-1831](#)

## Introduction to the System of Ethical Life

Here follows an approach to Hegel:

In the ancient world of the Greeks and the Romans, and in the Italian Renaissance, there was a Humanism that saw humanity as creating itself in the process of interaction with the external, physical world (in other words: through labour).

In philosophical terminology, this is the interaction between the human Subject and the Objective world. It generates the study of the relation between Mind and Matter, which has been the fundamental question of Philosophy in all eras.

Rational Humanism has always been challenged by more-or-less superstitious belief-systems. So, for example, the Humanists of the Italian Renaissance were overtaken by

Platonists and Mannerists and by the mystical Counter-Reformation.

The Italian Renaissance was followed by its mostly Protestant, North European equivalent, usually called “The Enlightenment”. Humanists of the Enlightenment such as Descartes and Spinoza were later contradicted by romantics such as Rousseau and Kant.

Hegel came into a Kantian world, wherein Kant was, in his own words, the “Critic of Pure Reason”. Kant wanted a way around pure reason. Kant wanted a license, or permission, to be irrational, or merely lazy. Kant wanted to escape the most difficult questions. Kant wanted a short cut.

To recover philosophy from Kant’s cop-out, Hegel did not go back to a static vision of the Human Subject, whether individual or social, facing an objective wilderness that must be tamed.

Hegel shows more than that. Hegel shows that the Objective universe is really an observed universe, and is in that sense a Human creation. As much as it has objective (material) existence separate from humans, yet what defines it is not that alone, but also the attention that it gets from humans. The Objective Universe is that-which-is-known, as well as being that-which-is-other.

In the [Introduction to “The System of Ethical Life”](#) (attached; download linked below) Hegel uses two terms in

his first sentence, the meaning of which we need to note. *“Intuition”* means sense-perception. *“Concept”* means knowledge. *“Perfect adequacy between intuition and concept”* means that what is sensed, is known. What is felt, is understood. When sense and understanding correspond, then we have what Hegel calls *“The Idea”*.

*“But because they [Intuition and Concept] are then held apart from one another in an equation as its two sides, they are afflicted with a difference.”*

They must exchange their qualities. They do not remain separate. They develop...

*“But what is truly the universal is intuition, while what is truly particular is the absolute concept. Thus each must be posited over against the other, now under the form of particularity, again under the form of universality; now intuition must be subsumed under the concept and again the concept under intuition.”*

And so on. There is movement. Hegel’s is a theory of how change happens. It is a theory of human development.

The word “subsumed” is typically Hegelian, and it carries over into Marxism.

We strive to understand these paragraphs. What we can see is that Hegel is describing, not merely a static relation of Subject and Object, but a development of the relationship

such that the opposing terms can change places, or one can be subsumed under the other, but their union, perfect or not, does not negate their identity. A simple relation is not perfect. There is more. The last line of the Introduction says:

*“Or in this way the identity of the particular (i.e., the side onto which the intuition has now stepped) with the universal is determined as an imperfect unification or as a relation between the two.”*

It may be better not to strain to understand such passages. It may be better to leave them open, so that meaning can accumulate around them as we look at more of Hegel’s output over the remaining eight parts of this course.

As much as this is simply good study practice (e.g. as advocated by [Tony Buzan](#)), yet patiently deriving meaning from incomplete or "broken" data is also very Hegelian, as we shall see later on.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Introduction to The System of Ethical Life, 1802-3, Hegel](#).
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